

Panel discussion: Women and Food Security

Key messages from Dr. Florika Fink-Hooijer, Director, European Commission Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO):

- Thank you for inviting me to this panel today to discuss women in food security. A very important topic, especially as it has been shown that food security really can have a positive impact on women's empowerment.
- It is important to highlight from the start that women are not only victims. They are also capable actors and agents of change in crises.

Overview of ECHO's [food and nutrition](#) policies from a [gender](#) perspective

- The challenges of global under-nutrition and hunger are serious and complex - the role of women is central in achieving successful and lasting outcomes. This aim is reflected in the Commission's/ECHO's food and nutrition policies, as well as the newly adopted Gender Policy.
- These policies have in common that they are prevention oriented, which will strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable households and individuals, reducing future suffering.
- The principal objectives of ECHO's policy for humanitarian food assistance (adopted in 2010) are to save and preserve lives, to protect livelihoods and to increase the resilience of people in humanitarian crises. This means that the response to the needs goes beyond the provision of food. Victims of crises may instead receive assistance that enables them to feed themselves, such as livelihood support or cash/vouchers. This type of assistance also boosts immediate food production or food purchasing capacities locally or regionally. It also makes people more resilient.

Food assistance vs. food aid

- This approach also illustrates the main differences between food assistance and food aid. Food aid simply involves the distribution of food, while food assistance is a more holistic approach that boosts the capability of vulnerable groups to improve their own food security.
- From a gender perspective, food assistance needs to be adapted to women's specific needs. It is also a matter of ensuring equal access.
- Ex 1: Even if women usually are the ones receiving food through organised distributions, it is important to check, through post-distribution monitoring, that women still have access to this food after they have collected it. The cultural environment thus also has to be factored into the way food is distributed (eg Pakistan).

- **Ex 2: Elderly women (and men) also experience difficulty in physically accessing food – this is a problem that we have encountered in South Sudan. To overcome this, in refugee camps our partners bring the food directly to the elderly.**
- **The need to address nutrition is increasingly recognised – it is no longer sufficient to focus on increasing the availability of food. The policy framework put in place by the EU, the work of the SUN (Scaling up Nutrition) movement and policy developments at WFP and FAO all stress the need to improve the nutritional adequacy of food intake.**
- **Pregnant and lactating women are identified, together with children under five years of age as the most vulnerable risk groups, for malnutrition. If a child is malnourished before birth and in the critical first 1000 days of his or her life, the effects will be felt for a life-time. In addition, the effects on stunting can hamper the economic growth of a country with at least 8 %. As under-nutrition is usually a result of more than one factor, ECHO supports a multi-sector approach, including access to food, health care and WASH.**
- **From a gender perspective, both boys and girls must have equal access to nutritious food and nutrition interventions, so that both will be able to achieve their full potential. Treatment of under nutrition is not only lifesaving, but it will also has a positive impact on a country's economic development since it enables women and men to achieve their full productive potential. This is why the EU has committed to reducing the number of stunted children by 7 million by the year 2025.**
- **The risk of mortality or complications in relation to child birth is much higher if the woman is malnourished. Therefore, women and in particular young women need to be the target for nutritional interventions and food assistance so that they can develop properly and live a more healthy life. If this is achieved, they are more likely to deliver safely and have more healthy babies – their ability to feed their babies will be enhanced and they will more generally be able to contribute to the societies in which they live, both through economic activity and by being better able to care for their families. We thus need to address the entire cycle.**

[The Food Assistance Convention](#)

- **The EU/ECHO has been a key driver for adopting the new Food Assistance Convention which leads to a more holistic approach in food.**
- **The 3rd Session of the Food Assistance Committee will take place in May 2014. The EU has made a commitment of 300 million € in funding contributions. As Vice-Chair, the EU will strive to push forward the work on key issues such as increasing local and regional purchases and enhancing the quality of food assistance. Buying food locally increases womens' income as they often dominate the local market.**
- **We are particularly keen to see that this session will have a discussion on the role of cash and vouchers. We are convinced that this can improve the dignity of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet (including women) and increase the effectiveness of aid. Cash and voucher approach also allows the beneficiary to have a choice (e.g. fairs or market places based on vouchers organised in remote areas in DRC). Cash and vouchers can very well be used for other sectors too, broadening the choice.**

- **Ex Lebanon:** For example in Lebanon, which is a mid-income country with a free market economy and a functioning banking system, ECHO is supporting cash-assistance to the refugees. Together with rent, food is the main commodity the beneficiaries spend this money on.
- **Ex DRC:** cash and vouchers can further contribute to improved security for women, as they can be concealed easily, whereas a food parcel is easier identified and stolen.
- However, the use of cash and vouchers is not the solution to all problems. The system is still flawed – it requires an in-depth prior market analysis and a certain level of infrastructure (where the cash is delivered electronically through bank cards or mobile phones) and may in some cases represent a risk of theft. In short, the cash and voucher approach has not used its full potential and there is still room for improvement. Both in terms of means of distribution as well as rendering it completely unconditional.

Multi-sectorial approach – [Gender](#) in [WASH](#)/shelter/health.

- Food insecurity and malnutrition will not be solved simply by providing food. It requires a multi-sectorial approach that creates an environment where people can be healthy. For humanitarian aid this means providing food assistance in combination with nutrition interventions (both food or health-based), hygiene promotion and access to health services.
- Assistance also needs to be adapted to specific needs of beneficiaries. To ensure qualitative humanitarian programming, gender and age need to be taken into consideration.
- Last year, ECHO adopted a policy on gender which aims to foster a common understanding between ECHO staff and partner organisations in promoting appropriate humanitarian response to the different needs of women and men of all ages. It equally features a [gender-age marker](#). The marker is a unique, new tool that assesses to which extent humanitarian aid projects integrate gender and age, helping ECHO to monitor its own performance.
- **Summing up:** While humanitarian crises are by definition not a context in which many actors would put questions of women's empowerment up front, there are nevertheless many things humanitarian actors can do wrong if they do not prioritise questions of food and nutrition for the most vulnerable groups.
- On the other hand, they can use the potential for transformation which, when well planned, pleads for a holistic approach in food assistance. ECHO will continue to support a policy that is gender sensitive and that takes into account women's specific nutritional needs as well as their potential as actors in society in their own right.